



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
National Marine Fisheries Service
P.O. Box 21668
Juneau, Alaska 99802-1668

August 2, 2000

MEMORANDUM FOR: Penelope D. Dalton
Assistant Administrator
for Fisheries

For

James W. Balsiger
Administrator, Alaska Region

Donald J. Berg

Determination of a Commercial Fishery
Failure Due to a Fishery Resource Disaster
Under Section 312(a) of the Magnuson-Stevens
Fishery Conservation and Management Act and
Section 308(b) of the Interjurisdictional
Fisheries Act--DECISION MEMORANDUM

Request that you review and forward the following information to the Secretary of Commerce for determinations under Section 312(a) of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA) and Section 308(b) of the Interjurisdictional Fisheries Act (IFA) in light of the fact that the Yukon River, Kuskokwim River, and Norton Sound commercial salmon fisheries failed beginning in 1997 and continuing to the present due to a fishery resource disaster. Such a determination will authorize providing funds, as appropriated, to address the commercial fishery failure.

In event that disaster relief funding is appropriated, NMFS will cooperate with the State to insure that the distribution of the funds is consistent with the conditions specified in the MSA and IFA.

GROUND AND NEED FOR ACTION

Governor Tony Knowles, State of Alaska, declared a disaster emergency for the Yukon River, Kuskokwim River, and Norton Sound commercial fisheries on July 19, 2000. On July 28, 2000, Governor Knowles wrote a letter to Secretary Mineta that requested Federal assistance because of the magnitude of the disaster. Under Section 312(a) of the MSA and Section 308(b) of the IFA, the Secretary of Commerce is authorized to determine whether there has been a commercial fishery failure due to a fishery resource disaster. However, before assistance can be provided under either authority, the Secretary must determine that:

- A fishery resource disaster resulted from natural causes or undetermined causes (both IFA and MSA), or man-made causes beyond the control of fishery managers to mitigate (only MSA), and, if so



A commercial fishery failure (both IFA and MSA) or serious disruption (only IFA) occurred due to the fishery resource disaster.

Did fishery resource disaster occur?

Very low returns of salmon occurred in the Yukon River and Kuskokwim River drainages, and in rivers around the Norton Sound, beginning in 1997 and continuing to the present. These low returns, indicated by low harvests, prompted two previous disaster determinations (Bristol Bay and Kuskokwim River regions in November 1997 and Bristol Bay, Yukon River, and Kuskokwim River Regions in November 1998), as well as this year's disaster declaration by the State of Alaska on July 19, 2000. The commercial catch of chinook salmon in the Yukon River was approximately 8,500 fish, less than one-tenth the historic average and lowest run in recorded history. The fishery for summer chum in the Yukon River was even worse, with a commercial catch of 6,800 fish. Amount was less than one percent of the historic average of over 100 fish.

Similar low returns occurred in the Kuskokwim River. Commercial catch of chinook was 22,000 fish, down from the historic average of 58,000.

Commercial catch of chum was 28,000 fish, down from the historic average of 447,000 fish. Commercial catch of sockeye was 110 fish, down from the historic average of 135,000 fish.

Rivers in and around Norton Sound also experienced significant declines. Commercial catch of chinook was 721 fish, down from the historic average of 8,000. Commercial catch of chum was 3063 fish, down from the historic average of 105,000. The State of Alaska's Department of Fish and Game indicates concern over whether escapement goals for salmon fisheries in the Yukon, Kuskokwim, and Norton Sound can be met. If escapement goals are not met, future salmon runs may be impacted by this year's dismal returns.

What caused the fishery resource disaster?

The exact cause of the apparent collapse of the salmon fisheries in the Yukon River, the Kuskokwim River, and Norton Sound is unknown.

Abnormally poor returns do not appear to result from low parent escapements or inaccurate forecasts.

A possible contributor is natural causes in the marine environment. Marine weather and oceanographic patterns during the middle-to-late 1990s are well documented. For example, water temperatures in the Bering Sea during this period were at record high levels and are considered to be a potential causal factor of weak returns of salmon. Similar observation of weather oscillations occurred on a global scale. Other indicators point to marine stress as a causal factor in reduced salmon survival. Returning salmon appear smaller than usual and arrived late. Migratory pathways were changed from previous years.

There exists of increased parasitism and predation, both of marine stress. Fish under such stress are less vigorous and more likely to suffer higher natural mortality rates. Taken together, these indicators underscore the likely role that changes in the marine environment may have played in reducing western Alaska salmon runs.

Will commercial fishery failure occur due to a fishery resource decline?

Commercial fishery failure occurred as a result of the inordinately low return of salmon to the Kuskokwim and Yukon River systems and the low returns in and around Norton Sound. As stated above, the Yukon River and Kuskokwim and chum-salmon runs were considered the worst in recorded history. Although the commercial fisheries in the Yukon River, Kuskokwim River, and in Norton Sound are considered small by Alaska standards, average earnings during the better years in the 1990s was slightly more than \$7,000--the amount of money made by commercial salmon permit holders in this area is vital to their survival. This region has few paying jobs, therefore money earned by fishing is used throughout the year. Few fishermen reached the \$1,000 mark this year, most making much less. Compare this with the \$2,800 average earned when a disaster was determined in 1998. Their plight is further exacerbated by low runs the previous two years.

The State of Alaska Department of Labor estimates almost 4,200 direct and indirect commercial fishing jobs in the Yukon-Kuskokwim region, including fishermen and crew. Village residents depend on the commercial fishing season to pay for such basics as electricity and sewer. The commercial and subsistence economies are so intertwined in the Yukon-Kuskokwim region that if the commercial fishery collapses, so does the subsistence economy and with it the livelihood of many public and private institutions.

The Yukon River, the Kuskokwim River, and the Norton Sound regional economies are also affected by the poor salmon returns. The State Fisheries Business Tax, paid by the processing industry for salmon is 1 percent of the ex-vessel value of the fish. One half of the revenues from this tax is paid back to the local governments in whose communities the processing occurred. In addition, many local governments assess a local tax on the sale of fish to processors. These local taxes range from 1 percent to 3 percent.

Another concern is the subsistence needs for salmon in the Yukon and the Kuskokwim River, and Norton Sound regions are not being met. This coupled with the low earnings in the commercial fisheries means that many residents in Western Alaska will be impacted twice by low salmon runs.

Conclusion.

As stated above, and in Governor Knowles' Declaration of Disaster
Emergency and Letter to Secretary Mineta (attached), financial
assistance is necessary to assist commercial fishermen impacted by
commercial fishery failure.

RECOMMENDATIONS

I recommend that you review and forward the attached determination for
signature by the Secretary of Commerce. The determination states that
(1) a relative absence of salmon has resulted in a fishery resource
status of undetermined but probably natural causes, and (2) this
is a disaster. ~~3-15-99~~ ~~Commercial fishery failure in Norton Sound~~
the Kuskokwim and Yukon Rivers beginning in 1997 and continuing to
present.

I concur.

Penelope D Dalton 8/3/00
Date

I do not concur.

Date

I wish to discuss.

Date

Comments